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Palmer, Thomas Witherell

Universal suffrage

Washington

1885

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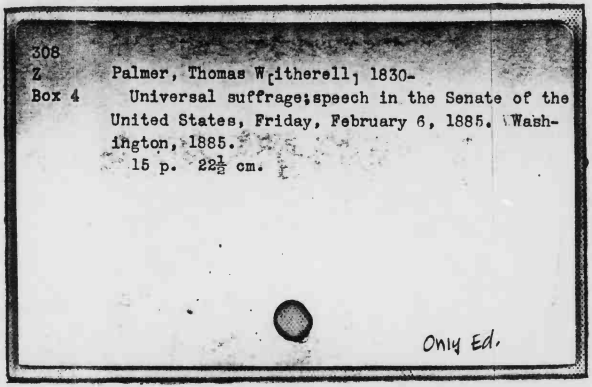
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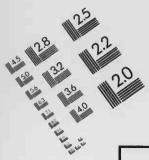
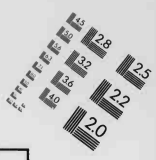
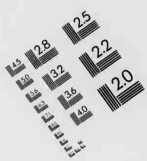
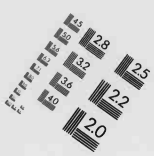

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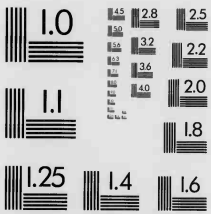

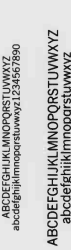

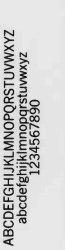

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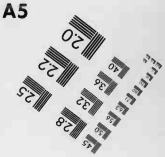
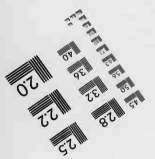
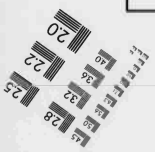
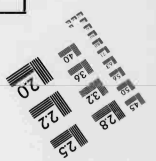

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UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE.

SPEECH

OF

HON. THOMAS W. PALMER,

OF MICHIGAN,

IN THE

SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1885.

WASHINGTON.
1885.

HARRIET MARTINEAU.

From the Statue by Anne Whitney.

INTENTIONAL SECOND EXPOSURE

HARRIET MARTINEAU

From the Statue by Anne Whitney.

SPEECH

OF

HON. THOMAS W. PALMER.

The Senate having under consideration the joint resolution (S. R. 19) proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, as follows:

Resolved, &c., That the following article be proposed to the Legislatures of the several States as an amendment to the Constitution of the United States; which, when ratified by three-fourths of the said Legislatures, shall be valid as part of said Constitution, namely:

ARTICLE —.

SECTION 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

SEC. 2. The Congress shall have power, by appropriate legislation, to enforce the provisions of this article.

Mr. PALMER said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: This resolution involves the consideration of the broadest step in the progress of the struggle for human liberty that has ever been submitted to any ruler or to any legislative body. Its taking is pregnant with wide changes in the pathway of future civilization. Its obstruction will delay and cripple our advancement. The trinity of principles which Lord Chatham called the "Bible of the English constitution," namely, the Magna Charta, the Petition of Rights, and the Bill of Rights, are towering landmarks in the history of our race, but they immediately concerned but few at the time of their erection.

The Declaration of Independence by the colonists, and its successful assertion, the establishment of the right of petition, the abolition of imprisonment for debt, and the property qualification for suffrage in nearly all the States, and the recognition of the right of women to earn, hold, enjoy, and devise property are proud and notable gains.

The emancipation of 4,000,000 slaves and the subsequent extension of suffrage to the male adults among them were measures enlarging the possibilities of freedom, the full benefits of which have yet to be realized; but, sir, the political emancipation of 26,000,000 of our citi-

zens, equal to us in most essential respects and superior to us in many, seems to me to translate our nation, almost at a bound, to the broad plateau of universal equality and co-operation to which all these blood-stained and prayer-worn steps have surely led.

RISE AND PROGRESS OF THE MOVEMENT.

The time which I may occupy in advocacy of this measure will not admit of even a cursory review of the history and progress of the movement whose ultimate is before us.

Like life insurance and the man who carried the first umbrella, its inception was greeted with derision. Born of an apparently hopeless revolt against unjust discrimination, unequal statutes, and cruel constructions of courts, it has pressed on and over ridicule, malice, indifference, and conservatism, until it stands in the gray dawn before the most powerful legislative body on earth and challenges final consideration.

In its progress it has benefited all and injured none. It has created a public sentiment before which Legislatures have bent and courts have bowed.

The laws which degraded our wives have been everywhere repealed or modified, and our children may now be born of free women.

Our sisters have been recognized as having brains as well as hearts, and as capable of transacting their own business affairs.

New avenues of self-support have been found and profitably entered upon, and the doors of our colleges have ceased to creak their dismay at the approach of women.

Twelve States have extended limited suffrage through their Legislatures, and three Territories admit all citizens of suitable age to the ballot-box, while from no single locality in which it has been tried comes any word but that of satisfaction concerning the experiment.

The spirit of inquiry attendant upon the agitation and discussion of this question has permeated every neighborhood in the land, and none can be so blind as to miss the universal development in self-respect, self-reliance, general intelligence, and increased capacity among our women. They have lost none of the womanly graces, but by fitting themselves for counselors and mental companions have benefited man, more perhaps than themselves.

OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED.

In considering the objections to this extension of the suffrage we are fortunate in finding them grouped in the adverse report of the minority of your committee, and also in confidently assuming from the acknowledged ability and evident earnestness of the distinguished Senators who prepared it that all is contained therein in the way of argument or protest which is left to the opponents of this reform after thirty-seven years of discussion.

I wish that every Senator would examine this report and note how many of its reasonings are self-refuting and how few even seem to warrant further antagonism.

They cite the physical superiority of man, but offer no amendment to increase the voting power of a Sullivan or to disfranchise the halt, the lame, the blind, or the sick.

They regard the manly head of the family as its only proper representative, but would not exclude the adult bachelor sons.

They urge disability to perform military service as fatal to full citizenship, but would hardly consent to resign their own rights because they have passed the age of conscription, or question those of Quakers, who will not fight, or of professional men and civic officials, who, like mothers, are regarded as of more use to the state at home.

They are dismayed by a vision of women in attendance at caucuses at late hours of the night, but doubtless enjoy their presence at routs and entertainments until the early dawn. They deprecate the appearance of women at political meetings; but, in Michigan, women have attended such meetings for years upon the earnest solicitation of those in charge, and the influence of their presence has been for good. Eloquent women are employed by State committees of all parties to canvass in their interests and are highly valued and respected.

They object, for their own States, to the addition of their former bondswomen because of their ignorance; but that risk was taken at greater hazard upon the adoption of the fifteenth amendment; and I hardly think the gentlemen would care to acknowledge their inability to provide that control for women which they appear to have obtained over the men.

They object that many women do not desire the suffrage and that some would not exercise it. It is probably true, as often claimed, that

many slaves did not desire emancipation in 1863, and there are men in most communities who do not vote, but we hear of no freedman to-day who asks re-enslavement and no proposition is offered to disfranchise all men because some neglect their duty.

The minority profess a willingness to have this measure considered as a local issue rather than a national one, but those who recall the failures to extend the ballot to black men, in the most liberal Northern States, by a popular vote, may be excused if they question their frankness in suggesting this transfer of responsibility.

The education of the people of a whole State on this particular question is a much more laborious and expensive work than an appeal to the several Legislatures. The subject would be much more likely to receive intelligent treatment at the hands of the picked men of a State, where calm discussion may be had, than at the polls where prejudice and tradition oftentimes exert a more potent influence than logic and justice.

To deny this method to the women of this country is to discriminate against them invidiously.

A whole race, distinct from us, was enfranchised in this way, after repeated attempts at securing popular approval from the voters had failed, and to refuse it to those to whom we are bound by the dearest ties betrays an indifference to their requests, or an inexplicable adhesion to prejudice, which is only sought to be defended by an asserted regard for women, which to me seems most illogical.

I share no fears of the degradation of women by the ballot. I believe rather that it will elevate men. I believe the tone of our politics will be higher; that our caucuses will be jealously guarded, and our conventions more orderly and decorous. I believe the polls will be freed from the vulgarity and coarseness which now too often surround them, and that the polling booths, instead of being in the least attractive parts of a ward or town, will be in the most attractive; instead of being in stables, will be in parlors. I believe the character of candidates will be more closely scrutinized and that better officers will be chosen to make and administer the laws. I believe that the casting of the ballot will be invested with a seriousness—I had almost said a sanctity—second only to a religious observance.

THE MISUSE OF THE BIBLE.

The objections enumerated above appear to be the only profferings against this measure excepting certain fragmentary quotations and deductions from the sacred Scriptures; and here, Mr. President, I desire to enter my most solemn protest.

The opinions of Paul and Peter as to what was the best policy for the struggling churches under their supervision, in deferring to the prejudices of the communities which they desired to attract and benefit, were not inspirations for the guidance of our civilization in matters of political co-operation; and every apparent inhibition of the levelment of the caste of sex may be neutralized by selections of other paragraphs and by the general spirit and trend of the Holy Book.

In the history of human advancement no single influence has been so powerful as that of the Bible. It has sufficed for all the ages past and will suffice for the ages to come. To its students has come wisdom. Its precepts have trained to virtue. To the wretched it has afforded comfort, and to the sorrowing it has brought consolation. None have learned from it bad citizenship, and its guidance has ever led to gentleness, honor, and truth. Its histories, poems, and inspired directions, altogether, inculcate the broadest equality of the human race and the greatest tenderness of mutual rights, while its pyramidion, the Golden Rule, voiced by the Saviour, contains the essence of all the law and the prophets.

Sir, my reverence for this grandest of all compilations, human or divine, compels a protest against its being cast into the street as a barricade against every moral, political, and social reform; lest, when the march of progress shall have swept on and over to its consummation, it may appear to the superficial observer that it is the Bible which has been overthrown and not its erroneous interpretation.

TRADITION AND PREJUDICE SHOULD BE LAID ASIDE.

Sir, if with our present experience of the needs and dangers of co-operative government and our present observation of woman's social and economic status, we could divest ourselves of our traditions and prejudices, and the question of suffrage should come up for incorporation into a new organic law, a distinction based upon sex would not be entertained for a moment.

It seems to me that we should divest ourselves to the utmost extent possible of these entanglements of tradition and judicially examine three questions relative to the proposed extension of suffrage: First. Is it right? Second. Is it desirable? Third. Is it expedient? If these be determined affirmatively our duty is plain.

IS IT RIGHT?

If the right of the governed and the taxed to a voice in determining by whom they shall be governed and to what extent and for what purposes they may be taxed is not a natural right, it is nevertheless a right to the declaration and establishment of which by the fathers we owe all that we possess o. liberty. They declared taxation without representation to be tyranny, and grappled with the most powerful nation of their day in a seven years' struggle for the overthrow of such tyranny.

It appears incredible to me that any one can indorse the principles proclaimed by the patriots of 1776 and deny their application to women.

Samuel Adams said:

> Representation and legislation, as well as taxation, are inseparable, according to the spirit of our Constitution and of all others that are free.

Again, he said:

> No man can be justly taxed by, or bound in conscience to obey, any law to which he has not given his consent in person or by his representative.

Aud again:

> No man can take another's property from him without his consent. This is the law of nature; and a violation of it is the same thing whether it is done by one man, who is called a king, or by five hundred of another denomination.

James Otis, in speaking of the rights of the colonists as descendants of Englishmen, said they "were not to be cheated out of them by any phantom of virtual representation or any other fiction of law or politics."

Again:

> No such phrase as virtual representation is known in law or constitution. It is altogether a subtlety and illusion, wholly unfounded and absurd.

The Declaration of Independence asserts that, to secure the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, governments are instituted among men, "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Benjamin Franklin wrote:

> That liberty or freedom consists in having an actual share in the appointment of those who frame the laws and who are the guardians of every man's life, property, and peace.
>
> That they who have no voice nor vote in the electing of representatives do not enjoy liberty, but are absolutely enslaved to those who have votes and to their representatives.

James Madison said:

> Under every view of the subject, it seems indispensable that the mass of the citizens should not be without a voice in making the laws which they are to obey, and in choosing the magistrates who are to administer them.

But it seems unnecessary to multiply these excerpts, familiar to every student of the history of those times.

These declarations were not confined to our shores.

Lord Somers said:

> Among all the rights and privileges appertaining unto us, that of having a share in the legislation, and being governed by such laws as we ourselves shall cause, is the most fundamental and essential as well as the most advantageous and beneficial.

The judicious Hooker wrote:

> Agreeable to the same just privileges of natural equity is that maxim of the English constitution that "Law to bind all must be assented to by all," and there can be no legal appearance of assent without some degree of representation.

In 1790, Condorcet, in his treatise on the admission of women to the rights of citizenship in France, says:

> Now, the rights of men result solely from the fact that they are rational beings, susceptible of acquiring moral ideas and reasoning on those ideas. Women, having the same qualities, have the same equal rights. Either no one individual of the human kind has true rights or all have the same, and one who votes against the right of another, whatever be that other's religion, color, or sex, from that moment forfeits his own.

Mirabeau condenses the whole question in his definition that a "representative body should be a miniature of the whole community."

The right of women to personal representation through the ballot seems to me unassailable, wherever the right of man is conceded and exercised. I can conceive of no possible abstract justification for the exclusion of the one and the inclusion of the other.

IS IT DESIRABLE?

Is the recognition of this right desirable? The earliest mention of the Saxon peoples is found in the Germany of Tacitus, and, in his terse

description of them, he states that "in all grave matters they consult their women." Can we afford to dispute the benefit of this counseling in the advancement of our race?

The measure of the civilization of any Nation may be no more surely ascertained by its consumption of salt than by the social, economic, and political status of its women.

It is not enough for contentment that we assert the superiority of our women in intelligence, virtue, and self-sustaining qualities, but we are to consider the profit to them and to the State in their further advancement.

Our statistics are lamentably meager in information as to the status of our women outside their mere enumeration, but we learn that in a single State 42,000 are assessed and pay one-eleventh of the total burden of taxation, with no voice in its disbursement.

From the imperfect gleaning of the Tenth Census we learn that of the total enumerated bread-winners of the United States more than one-seventh are women. They are classified in round terms as follows: Agriculture, 600,000; professional and personal services, 1,400,000; trade and transportation, 60,000; manufactures and mechanical and mining industries, 600,000. That these 2,647,157 citizens of whom we have official information labor from necessity, and are everywhere underpaid, is within the knowledge and observation of every Senator upon this floor.

Only the Government makes any pretense of paying women in accordance with the labor performed—without submitting them to the competition of their starving sisters, whose natural dignity and self-respect have suffered from being driven by the fierce pressure of want into the few and crowded avenues for the exchange of their labor for bread.

Is it not the highest exhibit of the moral superiority of our women that so very few consent to exchange pinching penury for gilded vice?

Will the possession of the ballot multiply and widen these avenue to self-support and independence?

The most thoughtful women who have given the subject thorough examination believe it, and I can not but infer that many men, looking only to their own selfish interests, fear it.

History teaches that every class which has assumed political responsibility has been materially elevated and improved thereby, and I can not believe that the rule would have an exception in the women of to-day.

I do not say that to the idealized women so generally described by obstructionists—the dainty darlings whose prototypes are to be found in the heroines of Walter Scott and Fennimore Cooper—immediate awakening would come; but to the toilers, the wage-workers, and the women of affairs the consequent enlargement of possibilities would give new courage and stimulate to new endeavor, and the state would be the gainer thereby.

The often urged fear that the degraded and vicious would swarm to the polls, while the intelligent and virtuous would stand aloof, is fully met by the fact that the former class has never asked for the suffrage or shown interest in its seeking, while the hundreds of thousands of petitioners are from our best and noblest women, including those whose efforts for the amelioration of the wrongs and sufferings of others have won for them imperishable tablets in the temple of humanity.

Would fear be entertained that the state would suffer mortal harm if, by some strange revolution, its exclusive control should be turned over to an oligarchy composed of such women as have been and are identified with the agitation for the political emancipation of their sex?

Saloons, brothels, and gaming-houses might vanish before such an administration; wars—avoidable with safety and honor—might not be undertaken, and taxes might be diverted to purposes of general sanitation and higher education, but neither in these respects nor in efforts to lift the bowed and strengthen the weak would the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness be placed in peril.

Women have exercised the highest civil powers in all ages of the world—from Zenobia to Victoria—and have exhibited statecraft and military capacity of high degree without detracting from their graces as women or their virtues as mothers.

A woman, Mrs. Ross, designed the American flag.

The records of all wars show the presence of women in the ranks. More than four hundred were discovered in the Union Army who had eluded the scrutiny of the mustering officers and served in disguise.

The services of Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, Elizabeth Blackwell, and hundreds of other noble women were as valuable as any received.

That the most important campaign of that war was planned by Anna Ella Carroll is attested by the report of the Committee on Military Affairs of the House of Representatives March 3, 1881, as "fully established," and was vouched for in elaborate detail by Hon. B. F. Wade, chairman of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, soon after its triumphant close permitted him to speak.

The rallying of a Michigan regiment by Ann Ethridge and leading them again into the hot fires of Chancellorsville was only a repetition of the chivalrous deeds of women recorded in every age.

The preponderance of women in our churches, our charitable organizations, our educational councils has been of such use as to suggest the benefit of their incorporation into our voting force to the least observant.

A woman who owns railroad or manufacturing or mining stock may vote unquestioned by the side of the brightest business men of our continent, but if she transfers her property into real estate she loses all voice in its control.

Their abilities, intellectual, physical, and political, are as various as ours, and they err who set up any single standard, however lovely, by which to determine the rights, needs, and possibilities of the sex.

To me the recognition of their capacity for full citizenship is right and desirable, and it only remains to consider whether it is safe, whether it is expedient.

IS IT EXPEDIENT?

To this let experience answer to the extent that the experiment has been tried.

During the first thirty years of the independence of New Jersey, universal suffrage was only limited by a property qualification; but we do not learn that divorces were common, that families were more divided on political than on religious differences, that children were neglected or that patriotism languished, although the first seven years of that experiment were years of decimating war, and the remaining twenty-three of poverty and recuperation—conditions most conducive to discontent and erratic legislation.

The reports from Wyoming, which I have examined, are uniform in satisfaction with the system, and I do not learn therefrom that women

require greater physical strength, fighting qualities, or masculinity to deposit a ballot than a letter or visiting-card; while in their service as jurors they have exhibited greater courage than their brothers in finding verdicts against desperadoes in accordance with the facts.

Governors, judges, officers, and citizens unite in praises of the influence of women upon the making and execution of wholesome laws.

In Washington Territory, last fall, out of a total vote of 40,000, 12,000 ballots were cast by women, and everywhere friends were rejoiced and opponents silenced as apprehended dangers vanished upon approach.

Some of the comments of converted newspaper editors which have reached us are worthy of preservation and future reference. The elections were quiet and peaceable for the first time; the brawls of brutal men gave place to the courtesies of social intercourse; saloons were closed, and nowhere were the ladies insulted or in any way annoyed. From the Isle of Man, where universal suffrage obtains, comes similar approval.

Women vote intelligently and safely, and it does not appear that their place is solely at home any more than that the farmer should never leave his farm, the mechanic his shop, the teacher his desk, the clergyman his study, or the professional man his office for the purpose of expressing his wishes and opinions at the tribunal of the ballot-box.

To-day—and to a greater extent in the near future—we are confronted with political conditions dangerous to the integrity of our Nation.

In the unforeseen but consistent absorption from immigrants and former bondsmen of a vast army of untrained voters, without restrictions as to intelligence, character, or patriotism, many political economists see the material for anarchy and public demoralization.

It is claimed that the necessities of parties compel subserviency to the lawless and vicious classes in our cities, and that, without the addition of a counterbalancing element, the enactment and enforcement of wholesome statutes will soon be impossible.

Fortunately that needed element is not far to seek. It stands at the door of the Congress urging annexation. In its strivings for justice it has cried aloud in petitions from the best of our land, and more than one-third of the present voters of five States have indorsed its cause. Its advocates are no longer the ridiculed few but the respected many.

A list of the leaders of progressive thought of this generation who espouse and urge this reform would be too long and comprehensive for recital.

Mr. President, I do not ask the submission of this amendment, nor shall I urge its adoption because it is desired by a portion of the American women, although in intelligence, property, and numbers that portion would seem to have every requisite for the enforcement of their demands; neither are we bound to give undue regard to the timidity and hesitation of that possibly larger portion who shrink from additional responsibilities; but I ask and shall urge it because the Nation has need of the co-operation of women in its direction.

The war power of every government compels, upon occasion, all citizens of suitable age and physique to leave their homes, families, and avocations to be merged in armies, whether they be willing or unwilling, craven or bold, patriotic or indifferent, and no one gainsays the right, because the necessities of state require their services.

We have passed the harsh stages incident to our permanent institution. We have conquered our independence, conquered the respect of European powers, conquered our neighbors on the Western Continent, and at vast cost of life and waste have conquered our internal differences and emerged a Nation unquestioned from without or within.

Our heroic and semi-barbarous ages have closed and slumber in history, never, I trust, to be reacted.

The great questions of the future conduct of our people are to be economic and social ones. No one questions the superiority of womanly instincts, and consequent thought, in the latter, and the repeated failures and absurdities exhibited by male legislators in the treatment of the former, should give pause to any assertion of superiority there.

The day has come when the counsel and service of women is required by the highest interests of the State, and who shall gainsay their conscription?

We place the ballot in the keeping of immigrants who have grown middle-aged or old in the environment of governments dissimilar to the spirit and purpose of ours, and we do well; because the responsibility accompanying the trust tends to examination, comparison, and consequent political education; but we decline to avail ourselves of the aid

of our daughters, wives, and mothers, who were born and are already educated under our system, reading the same newspapers, books, and periodicals as ourselves, proud of our common history, tenacious of our theories of human rights, and solicitous for our future progress.

Whatever may have been wisest as to the extension of suffrage to this tender and humane class, when wars of assertion or conquest were likely to be considered, to-day and to-morrow and thereafter no valid reason seems assignable for longer neglect to avail ourselves of their association.

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